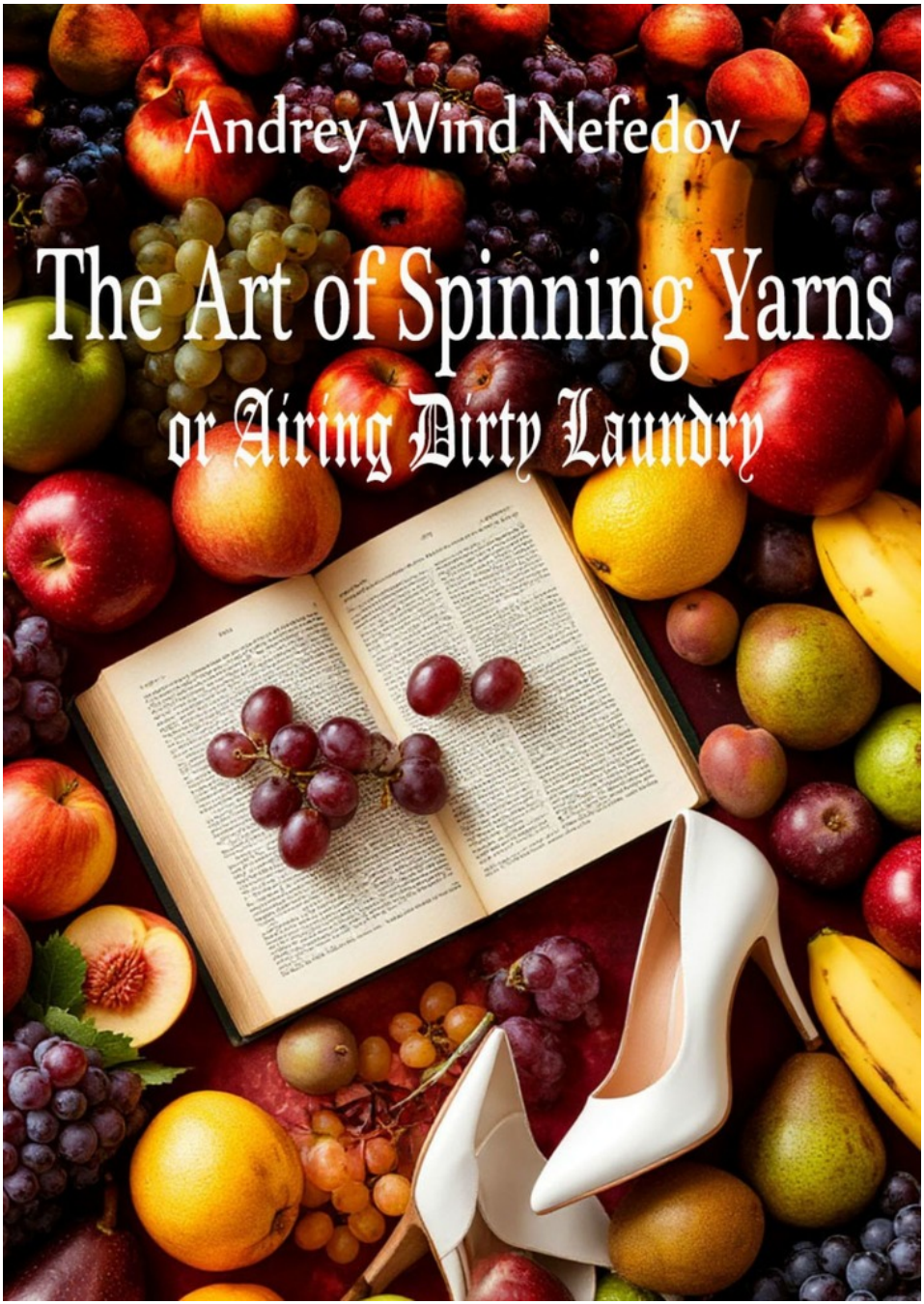
Andrey Wind Nefedov
The Art of Spinning Yarns
or Airing Dirty Laundry

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The Art of Spinning Yarns, or Airing Dirty Laundry

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This text is a masterpiece of sensory recollection and childhood longing. The translation must preserve its poetic flow, its vivid contrasts, and the fragile, aching voice of the narrator. The deeply introspective and poignant narrative, exploring themes of displacement, bullying, and the profound loneliness of childhood.

12+

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Оглавление

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1

When the Aftermath set in, he lay crucified by the immobility of old age, and in a final surge of helpless despair, he realized that the last segment of his life was drawing to a close — a segment as soft and viscous as dough, where any object thrown in would sink softly into the depths. The time had come to drown in the deadly thickness of silence. Alone and sick, unable even to hold a pencil to set down his final, unspoken words on paper, he lay on rumpled bed linen, breathing in the smell of the decrepitude of a meaningless long life. His eyes were fixed on the burnt-out, transparent pupil of the electric light bulb under the ceiling.

The Aftermath was silent and gloomy, leaving no hope, like the rotted clothes on a traveler who had died in the desert, whose bones were being licked by the rough tongue of the scorching wind.

What is old age for, if a man collapses into its wrinkled arms like a limp sack, having acquired in his life neither wisdom nor faith in God? Even his slippery, boneless «I» would not remain by his side on his deathbed. Without light or a companion, he would set off down unknown corridors to a place where merciless Sculptors would knead his dust into a new embryo and place it in the liquid cradle of another maternal womb, so that one day he might appear again among people and, according to immutable laws, once more walk the human path, comprehending all that he had failed to grasp before.

The Aftermath signified the approach of Silence, and this frightened him, because, having understood nothing, he was leaving life and sinking into Soundlessness, not knowing what questions he ought to have been asking.

About two months before his body turned into a limp, almost bloodless doll, he suddenly felt his mind brush against an invisible fabric (a poet would likely have called such a state the blessed grandeur of the world). Someone's breath generously warmed his memory, and he saw his motley life as if it were a giant, freshly painted canvas, still glistening with oily highlights and smelling thickly of paint. He clutched a fountain pen and

began hurriedly to retell what he had seen. The lines flowed one after another. He remembered and re-watched the bygone days many times over, but his memory did not fill his heart with understanding. Joy, tender tears, and pain were laid down on the yellowish paper; but of that (magically salvific) awareness, there was no trace. And the melody of life, heard but not sustained, evaporated.

The dropped fountain pen left behind purple blotches with blurry, fuzzy edges.

He was not the one writing the Aftermath now. He lay there, his eyes searching, and pages from the book he had written emerged from the musty gloom of the apartment — unread by anyone, unseen by anyone, destined for an unknown recipient. Every line, laid down on the rough paper surface by an untidy hand, crawled past him, a riddle of searing feelings. Once he had lived by them; now they remained only as words. His pale, whitish eyes read them, but his earth-colored, almost hairless head and his body, soft and shapeless as cotton wool, remained indifferent.

He had been born a long time ago…

2

I was born a long time ago. They say my first cry rang out at lunchtime and was like the cough of a choking child. I don't remember it myself. At the very least, the time of my birth did not make me a great lover of abundant meals. Although at times I was seized by a truly ravenous hunger, the kind you might only find in a grotesque film. Then, copious saliva would fill my mouth at the sight of greasy droplets on the brown crust (with occasional tiny hairs among the swollen bumps) of a goose roasted in the oven, or at the sight of creamy lava spreading over porous slices of juicy sponge cake.

My birthday fell in wintery weather, but I don't remember that either. What remained in my blurred, newborn memory was an inexpressible heaviness, bordering on suffocation, which descended and crushed me before I had even realized my own size and strength. I was filled with horror, an unbearable fear of reality, and this kind of fear would arise without any warning, from time to time, throughout my entire life. It killed me, and it amazes me that it didn't finish me off right away.

Then, the shameful sensation of wet pants was imprinted on my memory.

The sun scorched the huge windowpanes and filled the overheated classroom with stifling air. The closely cropped napes of necks blindingly reflected the streams of the celestial body. To the monotonous buzzing of flies, which occasionally bumped against the glass, and the humming of a large fan under the ceiling, a scrawny teacher in heavy glasses was saying something with concentration.

Sometimes, someone's dejected sigh was heard, like a scattering, dusty ghost, and a desk would creak under someone's little backside.

The need to relieve myself was always an agony for me, almost a torture. Even in adulthood, it nearly robbed me of my strength and senses and often put me in the most disadvantageous positions. I would break out in large beads of sweat, the back of my neck between my ears would turn to wood, and my groin would swell into a sack of burning, crushed ice.

And here I was, just a child, a defenseless figure in short trousers and a little white shirt; my eyebrows, bleached by the hot Asian sun, were arched over my guilty-frightened blue eyes. It was terribly shameful to call out to the wiry woman with thick glasses on her eyes and loudly ask to go to the toilet. I needed her to notice me herself, and so I silently (as one should in class) stretched out my trembling, impatient hand — no, my little hand, a chick's wing, not yet covered in feathers. But a silent plea is not always heard by everyone. I wait. The wall and the back of the schoolboy sitting in front of me warp from a hot tear…

Oh, where are you, great power of attention and sensitivity? In what cemetery of human souls does your shadow rest?

My body burst and spread, hotly, turning into a pipe from which shame and despair gushed out into the world (along with the natural need). In the suddenly looming, frightening silence, the splashes of drops resounded deafeningly, and a puddle of amber color flowed across the stone floor, changing shape and stretching towards the window. The heaviness that had been pressing inside me burst out and left within me an exhausting emptiness, clinging to the walls of my pulsating organs. Weakness and shame washed over me…

Shame. How can one describe this state of a brain smeared across a frying pan? Are there, among the clumsy letters of the alphabet, any from which one could compose the sensation of a space where you can neither turn, nor shrink, nor hide your eyes, filled with heavy tears, under a wing? Shame… A glass flask, and inside it — you with your limbs curled up, and the eyes of mercilessly laughing classmates press in around you like the countless branches and leaves on the crowns of a dense forest surrounding you. Shame drills into your back with thin, sharpened knitting needles when you walk across the schoolyard, and behind you, you hear someone's sharp, indistinct, but snakily hissing whisper. And the door, rattling with its glass and the loose tongue of the lock, that is also shame, because behind the door, which you must step through, is an abyss, the grimaces of small children's teeth, the gaping maw of an entire class, and yet you must open the door (cast-iron, immovable), open it with a thin little hand with a tiny blue, throbbing vein…

I passed through shame, like a punished soldier running the gauntlet of bloodily striking ramrods. Unneeded by anyone, but noticed by all.

The smallest in the class, the last in the school line, fair-haired, with

sparse teeth, biting the nails on his ink-stained fingers. That is what I was.

But I was also tender, yearning for affection, dreaming of fairy tales, and I loved girls. I loved them, it's true, secretly, covertly, from afar, out of the corner of my eye, for a man trampled by universal contempt could not openly display knightly feelings before future fairies and prostitutes. I was insignificant and extremely small, and they, the girls…

The girls, those transparent, gentle creatures in rustling hair bows and skirts, always cooing maternally near their dolls and fluffy kittens, stirred within me waves from an invisible, fairy-tale reservoir, where cozy shadows of trees flow over smooth coastal stones and the heart stands still in rapture from the spilled silence. It was to this world, and not to the dusty-sunny classroom and diligently memorized lessons, that the girls belonged, though they themselves did not know it. Their voices and smiles lulled and caressed me. Something unclear, something blurry and watercolor-like, emanated from the girls, which made their still-awkward arms and legs, resembling the limbs of green grasshoppers, and their thin little necks supporting large heads with neatly trimmed bangs, acquire an extraordinary appearance. I wanted to touch their fingers, but I was ashamed (or afraid?) even when we had to hold hands and dance in a circle around the fragrant New Year's tree, sprinkled with the silver of Christmas ornaments.

Among them, among the girls, appeared the most enchanting one, who had undoubtedly emerged from that very fairy tale of my soul, where the bewitching waves of a quiet forest lake rippled. Her name was Suok. It was impossible to touch her, no matter how much I desired it, no matter how much my bony chest was bursting with an incomprehensible excitement. I could touch the white movie screen, but my fingers, covered in chilblains, only met the magical sail that brought into the auditorium the Three Fat Men, Tibul, and the doll of the heir Tutti named Suok. Her sweet smile hypnotized me, captivated me, when she sang a song and juggled pins at night near the circus wagon. But to whom could I confess a feeling that tasted like a freshly-licked candy rooster on a stick, and how could I explain the taste of that feeling in my heart, when the entire surrounding world was completely incomprehensible and unfathomable, when I couldn't do anything.

Suok, your name became white flowers in a night garden and remained so forever in my small boyish soul.

Pineapple slices oozing sticky juice, fragrant apples as if coated in wax, a fragrant mango split open across its belly with a huge stone sticking out of the bright pulp, heavy clusters of black grapes with frozen drops of sparkling water — all this seemed like a heap of garbage to me when I remembered your face and the world from which you came, dear Suok. Even milk chocolate, softly breaking under the pressure of teeth and melting on the tongue, lost its unique taste as soon as the auditorium plunged into darkness and the screen splashed me with the colors of a wondrous world. From the top of my head to my heels, I trembled, watching the fairy-tale girl, and I almost perished from longing when the film ended, but I (for the umpteenth time) remained here, and did not drive away on the roof of a circus wagon, exuding an unattainable spirit of happiness. Tears choked me. I remained in the midst of a roaring crowd, in solitude, among the tattered pages of tedious textbooks, among the beastly smiles of bespectacled teachers, among the forked metal tongues of fountain pens, resembling knife blades, among the furious shouts of my mother about another failing grade. I remained in an alien world that did not accept me, an eternally jostling world where the girl Suok never existed. She could only look at me through the window of the movie screen. Or perhaps not at me, small and inconspicuous, but at other boys, stronger and older, who were interested in girls in some other way? I remember they said you absolutely had to see girls undressed. But what was there to see? I didn't know.

Along with the other boys, I would sometimes hurry, parting the transparent blueness of the water, to that end of the pool where a portly, languid matron was rinsing her young, naked daughter. Through the shimmering underwater silence, my eyes would be met by pink skin with a little knot of a navel, the slope of a smooth stomach converging at an angle to those folds where began the legs, which were far from girlish yet, but rather froggy. And there was nothing that would take my breath away, nothing of the captivating charm of Suok in the snow-white starch of her dress…

Later, much later, I would catch glimpses of naked girl figures, accidentally, through a crack in a door, fleeting and instantaneous, scalding my curious gaze without letting me see anything…

How wonderful that there are secrets, that always some unknown Something remains hidden from us, giving scope to dreams. However, at

that time, the secret had not yet had time to be born. It was somewhere, of course, somewhere unfolding, to one day block out the sky and fill the soul to the brim with tremulous impatience, but not then, not in those years. The world was already far too incomprehensible. I had experienced and become familiar with vanishingly little, not even enough to have any secrets. Any piece of nonsense whispered in my ear was a secret for a day or two. That was all the mysteries… For me, thin-bodied and tanned under the scorching Asian sky, it was not yet the time for secrets. Far more important was the rectangle of the pool, shimmering on the bottom with sunlit cobwebs.

You run onto the diving board, slapping your heels on the hot stone steps, push off with your feet, jump, and lose yourself completely. Like a bird, through the sun, through the wind, through the rain — in any weather, at any time — you soar and glide for a whole eternity. The pool, just moments ago unattainably distant, glimmering as a rectangle of water below, suddenly swallows you in a boiling foam and plunges the entire world into the resonant silence of its watery womb. And now I am not a bird at all, but a fish, wriggling right near the bottom, feeling wide, flexible fins on my ribs and legs.

In such moments, everything was forgotten. Not even forgotten, but it *left*, ceased to be. There was no room left even for girls. The shame for the wet pants slid off my soul like faded skin; the panic fear of the black classroom board, to which the teachers' piercing eyes pinned me, shattered into fragments. I was free in flight, unrestrained by anyone, elusive as a released arrow, agile and evasive. This was understandable and close. This was my true reality, because in those moments, I was *no one*.

But I had to surface, noisily splashing water, and return home, having assumed the form of a boy in short trousers. I had to sit at the table and swallow, choking, pieces of slippery meat in sauce. I had to memorize, running my finger along the book, rules and words devoid of meaning. I had to be a person.

3

Most of the parents I encountered in my life were not much different from my own. In making people out of their children, they tried to mold them into their own likeness, or into a creature resembling their ideal, which, by the way, never had any concrete form. The bulk of human desires does not take clear shapes; it is like groping for objects in deep darkness, where something is only guessed at under one's fingers, but never reveals itself as a single whole. Sometimes what is found by touch partially satisfies the blind, but far from always.

I tried to be obedient. Though, in most cases, my consent was never asked. I was one of the items that made up the complete family set. A doll that is carted from place to place has no words. And I was a doll. I was dragged from city to city, from country to country. I parted with familiar chairs and walls, I never had time to get used to anything, and it seemed to me that life could only be like this — constantly changing, devoid of a skeleton and a concrete form. Many years had to pass before I realized what a home means to a person — one's own home, a permanent home, a familiar home, lived-in and warmed by one's own breath. I was deprived of a home. I was an insignificant toy belonging to adults.

When I was brought to Moscow, I learned with surprise that this city was considered my homeland. Everyone around spoke Russian; I could understand every word that poured from the crowd, but for some reason, this did not bring me closer to people. The huge city looked at me indifferently, as if not seeing me, not loving me.

The hot gray asphalt steamed with spat-up saliva. The trams clattered in a foreign, wild manner, and the buzzing Russian speech all around suddenly became completely unnecessary. Something deep in my head refused to understand and resisted listening to the surrounding world.

«New kid?» a boy, dusted with red freckles, breathed into my face with a spray of saliva. «Hello, new kid!»

And a round fist dove into my stomach, from the blow of which my finely chewed breakfast rose to my very throat. The corridor, teeming with

schoolchildren, along with me, gurgled into a noisy abyss and plugged my ears with a whistling echo. Someone grabbed me under my limp elbows and dragged me into the classroom. My numbed legs trailed like ropes behind my body along the dirty floor.

«What for?»

«New kid…»

«Ah… I see…»

They plopped me down at a desk, recoiled, and started clamoring about their own things. As if through wet glass, I saw them, waving the gray sleeves of their school uniforms. And again, through the pain sitting like a coiled roll in my stomach, shame broke through. The familiar desire to gnaw through the floor with my teeth and bury my head in the blackness pressed down on my shoulders and the back of my head. And then snot started flowing from my nose, viscous, greenish from a cold — you sniff them back, but they go down your throat, they snuffle, they make you gag, as if it's a long meaty sinew that just won't be swallowed, sliding back and forth.

I remembered that boy's face. His thickly scattered freckles plastered my memory like a snowfall on a car's windshield. I was afraid to meet him even in my thoughts, this round-faced shorty with the nickname «Mamochka» («Mommy»). Who gave him that name, I do not know, but from that day on, if I so much as caught sight of him at the end of the street or a school corridor, I would instantly turn away.

In Moscow, this enormous city without borders, where I knew only four or five nearby streets, I had nowhere to hide from people, as I had done in the not-so-distant past by sinking to the bottom of the saving pool and listening to the water's rumbling breath. In all directions stretched a trash-littered space of construction sites, where wet, disheveled crows and scraps of newspapers flew, and boys in plastic jackets smeared with mud wandered. Any one of them could turn out to be Mamochka. The sight of my peers forever planted in the depths of my heart a vigilant fear of people and any of life's surprises… Perhaps nothing specific frightened me, but I feared *probabilities*: they could happen suddenly, unpredictably, affecting the calm flow of events, changing good to bad. Back then, I didn't know what I meant by bad things. I still don't know. I cannot distinguish bad from good, evil from good.

Was my stay at the Pioneer camp, saturated with the smell of pine

needles and the incessant din of children, bad or good?

On the first evening, as soon as it grew dark, I hid in the bushes, far from the dormitory building, and burst into tears. The tears ate at my cheeks and eyes, and the resentment towards my parents, who had thrown me out from under their wing into a cackling crowd of unfamiliar faces, burned my heart unbearably. I was shaking, sobs broke out in lumps, and not far away, illuminated by the cozy yellow light from the windows, other, quite happy children were taking a walk before bed.

The tears washed away the longing for home, the resentment towards mom and dad dissolved unseen in the darkness of the night, and I met the morning reborn. The camp breathed in the transparent, tender air deeply. Yellowish sand crunched under my sandals. Brisk music poured from loudspeakers hung in the foliage. And I, just like the others, did morning exercises, swallowed, ravenous, the most delicious brown buckwheat porridge, boiled with sugar in milk, and churned the coastal river water with my feet in the specially designated swimming area.

Together with a group of ruffians, I secretly broke into the storage room, where suitcases with their owners' names glued to them were stored on towering shelves (reaching the ceiling). In one such suitcase (it belonged to a harmless boy) was a huge box of «Korovka» candies. Perhaps nothing tastier existed than that sticky brown filling, housed in a brittle shell that tasted like the dried remnants of condensed milk on the walls of an empty can. We would climb like spiders for those candies, almost falling when a foot slipped and a hand convulsively caught a support, grabbing the first suitcase it found, which would crash noisily to the floor. Then we would burst out of the gloomy storage room, our mouths full of intoxicating sweetness, into the fragrant space of sun and summer.

I had come to the camp with my cousin, who was a year older than me, and found myself, following him, in the company of older boys who lived in a different stratum of human relations, one that had been closed to me until then by my naive ignorance. It was there that I learned about The Most Important Thing, so strictly guarded from children by adults. After the holidays, I brought home from the camp knowledge, not yet fully understood, about the strange relations between uncles and aunts. But all of this was just language, a huge, slobbering tongue onto which many details (rumors and gossip) about the unknown and forbidden had stuck. It was not real life and easily drifted out of sight. The topic remained murky

and unclear, an empty cup for now, into which something tasty was yet to be poured — if the stories of the older boys weren't lying.

Reality, however, had its own face, well-known and tangible, sometimes boring, but more often stupidly guffawing and snickering.

Rain filled the streets with bubbly mud. Shoes got soaked, delaminated into separate pieces, and squelched obscenely with every step. My body shivered faintly from the cold (how unfamiliar such cold was after the exhausting sun of Asia) and from the hunger that tormented my stomach throughout the tedious classroom lessons. The stinky school cutlets did not satisfy the hunger but only irritated my insides, as if some invisible hand was putting the school breakfasts through a meat grinder, preparing a fragrant mass to be flushed down the toilet… Such was reality, cluttered, moreover, with rows of scratched desks and an endless stream of homework. Failing and mediocre grades suctioned onto me like leeches, and the walk home from school turned into a long and colorful poem of my dreams, full of various scenes of my demise (a car crash, a clash with a horde of hooligans, an attack by a rabid dog, etc.). Any death seemed more desirable than a meeting with my mother, whose anger and contempt over my grades made my life a torture.

That was everyday life, and naked uncles and aunts… Well, perhaps someone in the world was engaged in that, but certainly not anywhere near me. Mom and dad were great at arguing, they fought more fiercely than stray dogs — that, yes! — but hugging naked… That they did not know how to do. I was sure.

«And how do you think,» my gap-toothed mentor would drool, «you came into this world? This, you fool, is what everyone does!» His eyes bulged from their sockets with excitement, his skinny hands fumbled in the torn pockets of his tattered, sack-like trousers.

«No, Pechkarik, I was not born from that,» nothing could shake my certainty.

«From what, then?»

«From love…»

That's what my mother had once explained to me, smiling with her soft lips, and the skin near her eyes, widely lined with black pencil, would crinkle so sweetly and kindly that I just wanted to stroke my mother's little wrinkles. When mom didn't turn into a fanged monster, she was the best of all creatures in the world, cozy, warming, protective. Could such

a woman do what Pechko-Pechkarik was slobbering about? She could not. And Suok could not, either. But my friends insisted and made me agonize: was I really deceived? Much remained unclear, which awakened a desire to grow up quickly myself and find out everything, to touch (finally!) the forbidden with my own hand and not let go (for some reason, it seemed I wouldn't want to let go).

Foolishness? Naivety? The first blot in the transparent, utterly visible pond of innocence? Genetic defects? I don't know. I don't want to think about it. That is a view from today, and I want to look now through those eyes, a boy's eyes…

4

Like a light veil of semi-transparent tulle, the weightless body of memory descends upon the sprawled-out space of the years I have lived behind me.

More often than other images, the form of a woman appears before my eyes, and it seems to me that everything life contains is gathered in her. She is soft and warm, she envelops me with a lulling breath that reliably hides me from unknown, but frightening misfortunes. She is affectionate, but the edges of her alluring, full lips, coated in a varnished red, tremble when the shadow of an electric charge runs across them. She is majestic, this woman, like a grand statue from the hands of a genius; you look at her for a long time, forgetting the ticking clock hands, and the longer you gaze, the more insatiability you experience. Her movements are full of the heaviness of the blood pulsating within her, which saturates the female body with heat and turns her muscles into lazy, languid flesh, stretched out in naked, smooth lines to provoke desire.

No, do not accuse me of impurity. I bowed my fevered head before the feminine world, feeling the superiority (the primacy) of these beings over me. But to penetrate their secret — and I needed to get there, it was vitally important — I could only do so through the depths of the female physical nature. The secret lay close, but it hid from me, disguised itself, cleverly changed its guise. And I reached for this alluring something, so that through touching the velvety pores of tender, life-giving tissues, I might enter into an indivisible union with nature.

At an older age, I somehow got hold of a thick magazine with ultra-thin glossy pages filled with bright photographs of naked models. In several shots, taken underwater by a scuba-diving photographer, a fairy-tale, long-haired brunette featured, clearly from the race of mermaids (semi-transparent, as if made not of flesh, but of clots of water). She was flying. A hovering girl in the soft blue tones of the water mass. Her undressed little body so mismatched the appearance of all the other models — sitting, standing, lying down — and looked so weightless, that its nudeness became

especially emphasized. Her figure hung. The hair on her head spread out thickly like a dark, murky sheaf of seaweed. Her breasts were rounded in an unearthly way. The muscles of her stomach were tenderly outlined and converged in a small triangle near her legs, where soft hairs were imprinted as a blurred, dark fuzz (cotton wool in water), beneath which, it seemed, there was nothing but skin as smooth as on her stomach…

Of course, she was not a doll, she (undoubtedly!) belonged to the race of women, living and desirable, and her body, soaring into the ocean's heights, in all its innocent and defenseless nakedness, was displayed for the viewing of all humanity. But she did not awaken desire in me… There was rapture and astonishment, there was a suffocating hurricane ready to annihilate me for my inability to express the feelings being born… That mermaid was simultaneously all the women of the world: all of them could fly, and each of their hair was clouds of murky seaweed.

I say again: I did not strive to feel a girl's flesh with my body, and when time laid me down on a creaky sofa with my first lover, I became finally convinced that fairy tales are forbidden from descending into our clumsy world, smelling of sweaty armpits. And a woman is part of a fairy tale.

I did not come to love her flesh. Disappointment pushed flesh beyond the bounds of dreams. But the body — slender, glowing from within with charm, like wax under the flame of a burning candle, marvelous and smooth — remained with me, around me. The body was not flesh. It lived in the curves of watercolor lines, luxuriated like a cat's silky back, sighed with the elasticity of girlish roundnesses… The body belonged to painting and to the light-and-shadow of photographic prints. It did not eat, did not drink, did not suffer from cutting pains in the stomach, did not hurry to relieve itself, yet it bit off crunchy pieces from red-sided apples, and two or three drops of juice ran down its lips; it held crystal vessels with thin necks in its long fingers, where the dregs of red, astringent wine trembled at the bottom; it, the body, wore multi-layered garments, but took them off every night, shedding them in lumps onto the floor, hanging them in silky streams on the backs of chairs, on the hooks of clothes hangers, and in the wardrobe, that enormous upright chest where fig leaves of all kinds are stored: of golden glaze, of matte-black solemn smoothness, of snow-white petal-like folds… The fabrics were shed and revealed living marble with a trembling vein under the skin (a horse), with a sigh escaped from the depths (foliage of a mighty tree swaying in the wind), with an affectedly

stretched back (a kitten), with eyes flung open from exciting thoughts (a pond, crystalline, deep, enchanting with the living magic of a slumbering element).

The body was one, the flesh — many. However, all lovers were still somewhere far ahead. To them, to their elastically protruding nipples, to their bared white teeth, I had (what nonsense!) to walk long and hurriedly (almost run from impatience to join the order of adults).

More than once, my heart lightly and quickly surrendered to the sweet captivity of first one, then another pair of girlish eyes. The appearance of those girls, as I now clearly see under the scrutinizing gaze of a magnifying glass, had nothing in common with the woman hovering in the underwater depths, but something of the future transparent fairies in weightless, lacy chemises still lived in them. Infatuation threw me onto a rapidly spinning carousel, smeared reality with greasy stripes in dizzying feelings, robbed the entire world of its outlines, except for the necessary, the only necessary in those days: shyly flushed cheeks, reddened, licked lips, and shining eyes.

The spots of evening lanterns on the road, the dark masses of cypresses stirring in the wind, the tremulous touch of moist little palms...

This was happening in the country of eternal love, where there are no borders between people, where there was only I and the feminine principle, numerous as flowers in an endless field, from which a fairy tale breathed. This was the only fragile bridge connecting the swampy greasiness of my life with the world of dreams, where a wide, open space stretched, thoroughly swept by a fresh wind. From this world, I would gallop on a white-maned horse, its leg muscles playing like springs, into the company of cooing girls, where my chosen one, proudly eyeing her friends, awaited me. In such dreams, classmates always crowded around, enviously biting their lips and the hangnails on their fingers. At times, I would rush from my world not for a rendezvous, but to fight some rival, to punish him for insolence or something else, and I would deal with him in a split second, ruthlessly firing a thundering revolver.

Oh, when did the paths leading to my wonderful land become overgrown with weeds? When did I manage to forget the road I myself had laid there? My beautiful horse with its damp nostrils was left unattended. My girlfriends grew up and left the mysterious land in search of real suitors, worthy, substantial, tender, to grow old with them and hobble on decrepit

legs to their well-earned final bed.

How did I let you slip away, O charm of fairy-tale deception?

I failed to notice as you spread your broad-feathered wings for flight and had already even flapped them. All I got were the swirling leaves, driven by the wind from your mighty wings.

5

Once again, I am being thrown into a travel suitcase, grabbed by the scruff of my neck: the powerless are tossed around like this, from corner to corner, staring helplessly at the hand of the giant-owner.

Again the sun burns my eyes, shooting yellow tips of sharp rays into my pupils. The earth hisses from the heat, and after the rain, it steams for a long time.

The globe has turned under my feet, pulling up unfamiliar streets with shouting crowds of black-skinned little people like a carpet. Again, strange faces (how many more are there on my planet?) scatter incomprehensible words around me, smiling with white teeth.

The place changed, the walls of the house, the yard with trees, but with us, like a tick dug into the soft flesh of the body, came the stifling tension of family relations. The domestic war did not stay behind, did not get lost in Moscow, which had disappeared beyond the horizon. The sky was covered in black oil. It dripped thickly. Wherever you stood, the house was flooded with slime.

Family is a lie. A decrepit rag wrapped around the bruised, thin hips of wanderers.

I became afraid to return daily from school along paths flooded with blinding sunlight to the gloomy house that had become a chamber of torture and nightmares, where they torment the soul with nickel-plated pincers of hatred, pull out the threads of nerves piece by piece with blood, and over and over again drive cold, mirror-like steel into wet, unhealed wounds. And it's not on purpose! No, not with malicious intent, but rather inadvertently, accidentally, waving their hands in a fierce fight — father and mother, male and female, the heavyweight carcasses of two buffaloes, the shrill and nimble shadows of two panthers, two bared maws, muzzles splattered with blood, two knights fighting to the death, who care nothing about the people standing nearby, because for them now only the enemy exists. They can trample those around them, break them, chop them to pieces with their whistling swords…

However, those are not my parents. I firmly know that I was born of love, for love, and from love. That's what my mother said, that's what my father affirmed, pressing me to himself with his big, warm palm. These dragons, with their scales torn to blood, do not believe in love; a brown plague seethes within them: hatred, jealousy, fury.

It happened that the stifling clouds would disperse, the hacked enemies would rise on shaky legs and remember me. They reached out their hands to me, averting their eyes from each other, they appealed to me, to my mercy and pity, they tried to win me to their side. And I would burrow into the bed linen, frightened by their crazed faces.

Once, I went out in the middle of the night into the adjacent room, where the flame of another scandal was buzzing. Dad was sitting on the sofa in just his undershirt; he had no other clothes on. His legs were bent at the knees, and between them, caught in the spot of yellow light from the lamp on a carved wooden stand, was visible that which so clearly distinguishes a man from a woman. Mother seemed truly insane: her eyes narrowed into black slits of mascaraed lashes, her upper lip, with saliva stuck to it, was curled predatorily. Dad was calm, seemingly — tired, exhausted. Dark circles hung under his eyes. But why was he undressed? She — in full regalia, gold flickering on her fingers, similar yellow droplets splashed around her neck, and from her earlobes flowed transparent streams of chain-linked stones. And father is naked. And his nakedness is unpleasant — the male appendage in its folds of skin and black frame of hair catches the eye — and repulses with its repulsiveness. In those minutes, I mentally promised myself never to appear naked before a dressed woman, because it is vile and humiliating… True, many years later, I was vomiting on the fluffy carpet laid out in my own apartment, crawling on all fours with my bare buttocks (but in a white shirt nonetheless), and the same repulsive male flesh hung disgustingly. I moved about in such a state before my wife, exhausted by my drunkenness, and threatened her with violence for her infidelity.

Where has my childhood with its undisturbed lakes of eyes disappeared to?

From where did insignificance creep up on me, entangling me in a spider's web?

I did not love, I despised, I hated to the point of nausea myself for belonging to the male race. I was deprived from birth by nature of that

charm for which the feminine gender is famed. I thirsted for their beauty, reveled in the charm of their forms, and despised myself for the purely male adornments with which I am endowed. When my maturation already demanded the touch of a maiden's fingers, but I did not yet dare (out of modesty, perhaps?) to get close to a female body, my own hands relieved the suddenly arriving tension of the organ I loathed. I was furious with self-contempt, seeing the swollen trunk and hearing the wet squelching of its skin.

Filth. Endless filth within me, which does not and cannot exist in female nature. Mermaids are not characterized by dirt; they are always washed clean.

How I missed the living presence of Suok! Why did you leave, beautiful girl? After all, you do not possess those poisons that make my monster raise its head. You could have taken me away in your circus wagon, but you didn't. Why? You had nothing to fear. I would never have encroached upon your fairy-tale purity. You are, even if a woman, still a mermaid who doesn't touch the earth, who has only the form of a woman, but not the flesh. Fiction has no flesh.

And beside me crowded adults, devouring each other, having pulled down their trousers. Even then I asked myself: if it is so foul, why do those who love each other engage in it? If the naked body is so shameless, why is man born naked? And what exactly is so indecent about the body — the stomach, the breasts, the buttocks, the shoulders, or the neck? A person is covered in skin everywhere, but in certain places it suddenly becomes forbidden to outside eyes. Who brands such places with shame? And if men and women are not supposed to touch bodies, then let it be forbidden entirely, but yet it is permitted to kiss a lady's hand and cheek in public. Why? Why is this contact of one skin with another considered innocent, while another, which brings not only an intoxicating tremor to the body but also new life, is called a sin? Up to what point is it considered decent to reveal a woman's breast: to the middle of the chest? To the agitated nipple that gives milk? To what invisible boundary?

I did not know this in childhood, and I do not know now, when I can barely hold a pen with my aged, weak fingers.

My mother knew well. She had nailed more than a few dozen women to the pillory, discerning in them a nature of lust that did not correspond to her notions of decency. She turned herself inside out to accuse my father

of adultery. She bit him, tortured him with the red-hot iron of her jealousy. One day, he suddenly smiled wearily, waved his hand (a weightless feather fallen from the wing of a shot bird), and left the house with a strange gait.

Laundry hanging out to dry cascaded onto the floor, having flown into the apartment corridor from the night's darkness. I saw the flickering white curves of the clothesline dangling from his hands, but I didn't understand what was happening. He was moving away, now appearing in the lamplight, now disappearing into deep shadows. The crickets were ringing deafeningly, and from somewhere came the strumming of a guitar. And then I saw his feet up close. Just feet, on one of which a shoe had, for some reason, slipped off the heel and was held on by the already stiffened toes. Above the feet swirled a thick darkness, and the roof of a huge gazebo was faintly discernible, where on ordinary days people played dominoes and chess. Now, the feet of a man who had dissolved into the darkness hung motionless here, and beneath him an overturned chair with a warped plywood back lay askew; a burnt-out lightbulb, unscrewed by someone and carefully placed on the floor, still lay there. The people who had come running shuffled their soles, someone was hiccupping incessantly and apologizing for something in a broken voice. From afar came piercing, tedious female sobbing, as irritating as a blister swollen on the heel from tight shoes.

Then it was as if someone had spilled liquid cotton wool from a huge bowl over the whole world. It plugged my ears completely, depriving people of their voices. And I understood then that I did not need people's words. I could manage without them. I found that I didn't need people themselves. What use were silent idols to me?

In those days, I wanted only wings under which to hide and warm myself: a chick hides under its mother's feathers. And I rushed to my mother, who did not know how to protect, who did not know the strength of love. She, who had given birth to me, pushed me out into the light from her body, did not know how to soothe. She stroked my head and sobbed. I examined the wrinkles on her hands, felt sorry for her, but refused to recognize her as my mother, for she had deprived me of my father, the only one in the whole world.

And I ran away when we returned to Moscow.

I bolted, to find shelter in the clumsy embrace of a skinny girl in one of Moscow's multi-room apartments. The warmth of her cheek, pressed

against my cold neck, carried more motherhood in it than any touch from my real parent. She flowed into me, this young girl, she drew the grief out of me, lightened my soul. She calmed me, wanting to give peace, not to distract. She didn't say anything if she didn't know what words were needed. She was a real person; she hadn't yet had time to lose anything. And she was in no hurry to turn into a woman.

I felt her skin. Everything inside me trembled with mounting impatience. My hands greedily fumbled over her knees, trying to sneak under her light little skirt. At times I heard her shudder, but in response to my hot insistence, I would hear her quiet voice every time:

«No, you mustn't. It's too early.»

I would retreat, frustrated, my insides turning into hot ashes.

Then fate stole my young mother from me and slapped me in the face with a dirty rag taken from a long mop. The merciless fists of the boys at the children's home worked me over, following the established order there, and restored the memory of the world's cruelty, which had begun to fade.

Ahead lay the road, along which day after day crowds of people trudged, jostling with their elbows, squabbling, striving for happiness, joking and smiling. It was a dusty, well-trodden path, familiar to all herds, and the drovers with their sticks commanded me to step onto it, erasing from my head all thoughts of kind fairy tales.

6

I doubt I could recall now what whim made me fail to return, one day, several issues of her «Pop-Foto» magazines to a tall, full-chested girl from a senior class. The portraits of famous long-haired musicians with moronic smiles on their faces and electric guitars in their hairy hands were creased and cracked, having passed through the hands of dozens of admirers. Why did I keep those magazines? Though, I wasn't the only one who had an eye on them. A handful of stocky guys, resentful and irritated, believing I had cut them off on the turn and deprived them of their beloved pop idols, met me on a spring morning near the school doors and dragged me by my arms to the back yard.

The first blow hit my ear, and the trees above me swayed, catching the tender blue of the sky with their not-yet-greened branches. The raw earth with dark clumps of mud rushed into my eyes. The jabs of sharp-toed shoes printed my back lengthwise and crosswise, while I hid my head under bloodied hands and covered my stomach with tucked-up knees. Luminous rings flared in my brain and swelled, pulsating, to the size of my skull, after which a red spiral girdled my entire body from within, pressed like a tight spring against my shell and almost tore me apart.

And again, shame surrounded me and began to seep through my pores into my eyes and the back of my head.

I could have been seen from the outside, pathetic, turned into a crumpled heap of rags, from which bloody snot flowed. I could have been seen from the outside in this disgusting state, as I fumbled with my palms over the wet earth, blinded by dirt and bruises. I was terrified that I might evoke pity, and it burns like hot coals poured over you.

But my native Moscow and my dear school remained indifferent; they were not in the habit of noticing those who had fallen. This spared me from mockery. It did not disgrace, did not humiliate my male dignity in the eyes of the girls with whom I was supposed to go on an excursion to distant Tallinn, to whisper with them on a shaking night train, to exchange glances during the day on the bus…

The trip was a disappointment. I expected to meet troops of musketeers and knights in light armor, hoped to admire banners fluttering in the wind with golden lions and dragons on coats of arms, but everywhere my eyes stumbled upon shop windows and tavern signs. The guys secretly gulped beer and groped girls.

My fingers also managed to sneak into someone's panties…

On the walls of the dark train compartment, white blotches from passing lights darted about. The elastic of the girl's panties pressed softly against the back of my hand. The invisible flesh under my fingers greedily swallowed, as if it were a hot, tongueless mouth. A couple of times, the girl's legs twitched and their strong muscles squeezed my palm, drowned in the moist depth.

«Don't be afraid,» her whisper from parched lips into my ear.

«I'm not afraid,» I didn't recognize my own voice, hoarse with excitement.

At that second, the door slammed open with a crash, and light drenched all of us, tightly seated on the berths. The teacher-guardian opened a huge mouth and hissed at our disheveled guard:

«I'll give you such a scruff-shaking! Milksops! Come on, quickly, disperse to your own compartments!»

And the boys scattered away from the heated girls. And outside the windows, lanterns and houses flew by, where people lived in the coziness of yellow lamps. Minutes flew, days and years flew. Adulthood rolled in relentlessly, and I could not escape it. Probably, I didn't even want to at that time. I thought that my departing childhood would take with it the dependence on my elders, on their orders and prohibitions. But the elders didn't go anywhere; they just strangely transformed. It seemed that I would grow up and find myself, but it turned out that there was no 'me' at all, there was no one for me to become, unless it was someone's toy, a shadow, or perhaps a trader, busy seeking a profitable deal.

With age, my body began to emit an unpleasant smell of sweat. More often than before, I had to scrape the bristles on my chin and cheeks. Alcoholic drinks turned into an integral part of everyday life. Thoughts about the contents of my wallet became more intrusive. The mysteries, which my childish mind had dreamed of penetrating, dissipated, vanished as if wiped from the surface of a cluttered dinner table with a wet rag, leaving only tiny bumps of oily droplets.

Perhaps life could still have become different? It's a pity I lacked the elementary decisiveness to take some important steps and turn into a normal person. I understand there's no point in making excuses, and no one is interested in excuses anyway. Life is already behind me. As of today, nothing remains — neither dirty laundry nor dress suits. To be honest, the past isn't remembered as particularly colorful either. Of course, certain events occurred, but they had nothing in common with a fairy tale. Everything dragged on too monotonously, banally, it smelled of vulgarity.

On a parade ground drowned in brown puddles, they taught me to march in a column of emaciated soldiers.

I could choose not to retain in memory the multi-day exercises in the rainy forest, the target practice, the latrines smeared with shit. I could have crossed it out, torn it out like a soiled page from a draft, if this drill had not been the prelude to everything that followed.

It seemed that the time of terrible wars belonged to the distant past, that no one would ever again have to cut their lives short under a machine-gun onslaught. I thought the army was meant only for training, vile, humiliating, but still training for some unlikely event. But many kilometers from my military unit, automatic rifles and guns were pounding, ripping the dry air with whistling lead. A real war was going on there, real blood was flowing there, young guys were writhing without any pretense. I drove away the thought that I, like many fair-haired lads with foolish smiles on their faces, could be thrown into the stifling region of foreign mountains, where death would not leave me for a single step. I banished these thoughts, but they became more intrusive, frightened me, dug in their stings, determined to come true.

And now, hot sand crunches under my feet again. I've almost plunged back into sunny childhood.

Sometimes it seems that if I look back, I will see the thick, fresh greenery where my father's varnished car stands in the shade. But the sand is trod not by sandals, but by heavy army boots, under whose thick leather sweaty feet ache. This is not childhood, nor a game of Cossacks and Robbers. Here, I might one day collapse and remain among the thorny twigs, their little claws clutching at my tunic. And it is not within my power to refuse to walk on that earth. Long since not a child, but again some mighty paw has plucked me from under the cool birches and hurled me into a foreign country, without asking my consent. The jagged edge of the

bluish mountains on the horizon reliably cut me off from the homeland I can never seem to get used to. And do I even have a homeland? What is that?

Sometimes it seems to me that we are carefree kids playing at war. But that's rare. More often, I have the illusion that I am sleeping deeply and for a long time, and my sleep is heavy. If I just strain, push hard, scream, the canvas of this tedious hilly landscape will tear, the poisonous colors will wash away, the bearded figures in turbans, crouching low, will disappear. But the film doesn't rip, the screen doesn't go dark, my eyes don't fill with the calm darkness of a room; instead, lead keeps flying from the dusty distance, and my sweaty clothes stick to my back.

Pashka, the good-natured joker, who always shaved his head bald so it wouldn't get steamed in the heat, planted his face into a mound, didn't even break his fall with his hands — just dropped like a sack. Away from him, a wall of dust rose, fountains of sand ran along the ground, brittle stone shattered into sharp splinters under a bullet's impact. Pashka didn't get up. He lay there. A hurried red stain spread underneath his head, slightly tilted to the side, releasing its tentacles. On the left side of his neck was a tiny dark dot — the mark of the stinging bullet — and under his right ear, where the lead bee had flown out, a piece of flesh was torn away and hung from a wet flap of skin, as if on sticky paper. His chin was rolled in sand, and saliva, not yet dead, bubbled. A shiny greenish insect buzzed mournfully over Pashka's protruding lip, and the dusty yellow haze continued to shudder and belch with gunfire. This haze lives its own separate life, as does the sand crawling under the wind. Every now and then, little fountains shoot up; they have almost nothing to do with me, they don't even threaten me, but writhe and dance on a whim, scattering in rows, sometimes breaking off near someone's figure, which would jerk, bitten, and become soaked with a dark, bloody stain.

The more intently I stared at the familiar, seemingly unshakable, solidly constructed forms of the external world, the more I understood my own delusion: nothing was reliable, everything turned out to be fragile and crumbled from a insignificant wave of a hand (a grenade flew).

«Ah, you... damn it...»

The azure sky was torn by hissing stripes of smoke. Just like fireworks at a children's carnival, where party poppers fizz and sparks from Bengal lights shower down to the delighted squeals of kids.

The slope jerked, choked on a shell, the mighty chest convulsed, in an instant the earth swelled and belched out black clods mixed with fiery saliva. A drumming started all around, an deafening bang, and suddenly a heavy carpet was thrown over me, sealing me off completely. Grains of sand dug into my cheek.

What woke me was the timid *ding* of crystal glasses, followed by the tedious droning of an announcer's voice (the radio). Someone sighed heavily. A white-coated shadow passed through the shimmering air.

A dreary awakening. No one was waiting for me here. I was one of a thousand strangers. They turned me over, wiped me down, took my limp body parts in strong fingers, slid the cold glass of a bedpan under my crumpled appendage, peeled bandages from the bloody scum on my skin. A poisonous medical smell poured into my nose. The doctors worked, doing their duty, sniffling and frowning. Sometimes a colorless nurse would wink at me after procedures.

«Why so glum, soldier? You got off lucky, be happy. You'll limp for a few months and then be as good as new.»

I remained silent and followed the flies buzzing under the ceiling with my eyes.

7

All sorts of things happened: during the day, staring at the rain-washed window, I would lie motionless for hours, then fall into a rage, pummeling the dusty sofa with my fists and threatening some invisible someone; and at night, I would cry quietly, burying my face in the yielding breast of a casual acquaintance, frightening her no less than with my fits of soul-rending screams.

Day by day, the despondency changed form, flowing into bewilderment: people stubbornly continued to live, while inside me lay a dead emptiness, a burden too heavy to bear. Yet in the world, nothing had changed, nothing had been shattered to pieces. The anthill teemed and jostled. In this vast theater, everything went on as usual, everyone played their role.

The study at the institute, which my veteran friends had dragged me into, slipped past like a simple game of tic-tac-toe. A dozen new faces appeared in the group portrait of acquaintances; some shook their flabby cheeks, others bared their mouths optimistically. Various female specimens would sit down and, in anticipation of the usual entertainments, languidly lower the curtains of their fluffy eyelashes.

These women were strikingly different from my schoolgirls. The girls from my clear childhood never changed, because they remained there — in the cooing round dance of white pinafores and hair bows, they would blush and feel shy, whisper in ears (about a very important secret), steal glances at the chosen ones of their hearts, who did not notice them. They lived inside me, not among living people. Among people, they grew up, stretched out, their features coarsened, turning from playful non-women into ordinary females. But inside me, they were threatened by no metamorphoses; they were securely soldered into a layer of a very specific time, which was placed in a vacuum chamber where no outsiders were admitted, those who could break things and make a mess. No meek and frightened girls remained; they were replaced by beautiful women, in whose eyes a coal of cynical, all-understanding fire constantly smoldered. In none of them, no matter how hard I stared, could I detect

a shadow of childish simplicity.

And yet, the objects of my chaste infatuations had not died.

I knew for sure that they continued to live around me and within me, remaining invisible to the bustling outside world. If they had truly disappeared, I too would have ceased to be, the field would have stopped sighing with cornflower-blue waves (what was it sighing about?)…

Ah, let me back into the colored fairy tale! I don't like the gray canvas of my present relationships. Make me tiny and naive again, don't hold me down with cruel laws!

Let the world not grow up…

These women were strikingly different from my schoolgirls, I cannot help but repeat. One of them, a dark-haired enchantress, drilled into me through the semi-darkness of the room with predatory eyes. Such a gaze does not seek a shy smile from lips licked with excitement. Such a gaze awaits a nod, a sign… She stretched an elegant hand towards her friend. The snakeskin of her tight sleeve flashed and dimmed. The tips of her fingers with lacquered nails trembled. And her friend laughed, she understood. Ah, her voice! Silken threads on the wind… She was entirely woven from her voice. If only it wouldn't fade, wouldn't dissolve in the room's shadows, which were not meant for voices at all. To take it in my hands, bring it to my mouth in a cupped palm and inhale, to feel the velvety breath of this long-legged female, to feel the even heaving of the elastic walls of her lungs… Her laughter did not cease. The whites of her eyes swam very close to me and then the sourish smell of wine mixed with the scent of lipstick wafted over me. Her breath fumbled over my face, pulsating nervously and hotly.

From behind the loose shock of hair, the milky shoulder of the first woman rolled out, with resinous heavy braids flowing over it. From under her lush lashes splashed a dark-green depravity. And I (for the umpteenth time in a row!) surrendered to the power of their demanding, all-consuming lust.

In an instant, they were completely naked, crawling onto me from both sides with little squeals, turning into a heap of roundnesses crowned with firm nipples. Under my lips, the goosebumps of their skin were softly tangible. A heavy gloom, saturated with drunken breath, teemed with arms and legs; strong muscles pressed from everywhere; enveloping mouths flowed over my body. The heated nymphs took turns changing places, sat

down on the sinewy toy, cried out, heavily fell on their sides, rolled away, and with hands and hot lips greedily released the male oil from me. At times they forgot about me and frolicked with each other. Before my face, buried in the pillow, sank the resilient spheres of buttocks, outlined by a deep shadow at the point of contact, forming a black tracery of hair receding into an abyss (another space lived and pulsed there, where a hand would sink irrevocably). Every now and then, the friend on top would dip her hand into this swallowing darkness, her fingers disappearing into the yielding chasm, her body shuddering nervously, as if wanting to tear itself away from the rumpled bed with a jerk and take flight.

But no, no one flew. There were no girls smoothly gliding in the transparent shimmerings of green-blue space. The women came with an ordinary step, dropped their clicking shoes, pulled down their thin panties, slightly bending their backs and lifting their legs as if prancing. The whitening outlines of buttocks rolled… Why did you come, women?

The first kiss with another school love would mercilessly strike my legs, rob me of strength, fill me with trembling, and I would almost fall. The touch of timid lips (with all their clearly perceptible cracks and bite marks) would be remembered for weeks, and my head would spin. We, who knew nothing of love except its enchantment, groped our way through the novelty of sensations, choked on infatuation, trembled: what if the other one laughs, pushes away? Tender touches to the velvety skin of a girl's cheek could at any moment turn into a painfully wounding touch of a sharp razor (she is indifferent to me, she loves another… or some other devilish turn of events). The most tormenting question: does she love me?

«Yes,» she would barely sigh.

«Yes,» another little girl would whisper to my passionate question and hide her eyes.

«Yes,» a third would agitate.

These ones did not agitate. The performance was played out with a cold, somehow calculated fury. There was no mystery in the kisses. Nothing was sacred. The partner's desires were easily guessed, bodies obediently writhed… I fought my way (spurring myself on) through the thickets of exciting unknown to the edge of the adulthood that had beckoned for so long, and I did not want to go further. But it was too late. The dense fairy-tale forest behind me shifted its trunks and hid from view the caressing, kind wolves and bears, the laughing long-haired mermaids,

the knights in shining armor, the sorcerers under every bush. Probably, I proved unworthy of my world (was it ever mine?), and it pushed me out, infected with the virus of impurity, into the crowd of the similarly diseased.

Then, by chance, came the one I didn't want to pull by the hand into bed, to plunge into the stupor of countless moans and caresses. Getting ahead of myself, I will say that she was destined to become my wife. She glowed with crumbly gold around her face, looked upon others calmly, almost indifferently. It seemed she stood high above everyone (did she fly?).

Once, like a yellow stroke of liquid sun, a strand of her long hair, as she inclined her head, rubbing the corner of her transparent blue eye with the tip of her little finger, flowed over her shoulder, and it occurred to me that she was an emissary from that other place. Hope ignited in me. The deity to whom I had prayed and to whom I had sacrificed, throwing my feelings into the fire, had turned its gaze upon me. A downpour of bright rays saturated the air with freshness; it pierced my chest, filled my heart with vastness.

I remember, I expected nothing from her: she had appeared from a world not our own at all, though she was very earthly, tangible (we strolled arm in arm in the evenings). I liked her walk, slightly uncertain, as if touched with a drop of inelegance, somewhat unskilled. Her manner of slightly tilting her head during conversation was endearing, while the golden mass around her head fluffily stirred and slowly slid towards the tilted side. The charm of our meetings lay in the fact that she did not seem like a woman. Very sweet, but nothing female-alluring, teasing. Alas, it was precisely this that brought us together, deceiving us, for in that period any relationship led to bed. Youth demanded a skirmish; otherwise, the very meaning of the connection was lost. Dreaming of a woman without tangible female flesh, I simultaneously insistently demanded a sensual body.

She yielded, and my astonishment knew no end when I found beside me a naked, thin little creature with barely sketched breasts and clearly outlined little ribs under transparent skin. She comically heated up, feigning passion, but it was obvious that her sexual experience amounted to two or three instances. Her body was still dormant.

Despite mutual disappointment, we still repeated our copulation, but why? Did we actually enjoy being together, yet our meetings seemed not entirely complete without an embrace? What made me break off all

relations with ardent girlfriends and occupy myself with this fragile girl, the sight of whose bare arms, and indeed her whole body, doused me with fright each time: was she a woman at all?

Now I am scratching on paper with a pen that constantly needs refilling with ink, so that the dark-blue saliva does not stop oozing from the forked nib of the fountain pen, leaving curlicues twisted into words. The laborious, measured scratching of the pen's tip, with dust particles clinging to it, reminds me of the unhurried flow of life. The days pass, and I do not understand what purpose they serve. In films and books, there is no room for the superfluous; everything is subordinated to the logical channel of the narrative, tightly interconnected, every step is for the sake of the next step towards a definite goal. For what, then, am I pouring my guts out onto paper?

8

My wife was admired by every single one of my friends, regardless of their gender. Compliments rang out like crystal glasses of sparkling wine… bows, theatrical genuflections, bouquets of flowers, perfume bottles, earrings, and other small tokens of attention filled the space around her. She was pleasing, knew how to make people fall for her, and amused herself with it, while I was burned by jealousy. She gave pieces of herself to others, feeling no sense of loss, whereas I, with every fiber of my being, felt that her slightest smile, directed at anyone else, was a robbery of me.

Through the dark wine bottles set on the table and the bluish glints of crystal vases, I watched carefully, shielding my burning eyes with my palm, the turn of her beautiful head, her hair gathered in a bun, her muted smile, full of attractive power. And they, those males reeking of tobacco and vodka, reached for her, clearly hoping for more than just a smile. Sometimes their dark-haired hands, in sleeves rolled up to the elbow like butchers', touched the silky folds of her dress.

The men… I felt them perfectly, healthy, pushy, confident in their male irresistibility… Here, one has a swollen cigarette filter stuck to his fleshy lips. And another's nostrils are sensually flared, like gills, inhaling the scent of her body.

And she, commanding the world, at times capricious, witty, playful, belonging to me alone (what fat, swallowing greediness?), laughs in response to their vulgarities, as if not noticing them. Or doesn't want to spoil the relations? After all, they are the husbands of her friends. Should she slap them? Though, she could give one a smack; look at that one, he's crossed his legs like a baron, unbuttoned the button on his shirt collar…

Dolls and comics had long been swept from the table and flown away in a rustling flock of rejected paper sheets that once served as my unglazed windows into enchanted worlds. Now, all around — the ash of everyday cigarettes on scraps of indecent love notes and a handful of contraceptive pills. I stand on the bare table, abandoned and needed by no one, like

a traveler in the middle of a cold desert, unscrewing a burnt-out electric light bulb. Tenderness and love, like timid young animals, have long since scattered. Henceforth, nothing lies ahead except dozens of boring years, swept by a dreary wind. Having once stepped barefoot onto the path of shameless adults, I pierced my foot on shards of cynicism and thereby doomed myself to a slow and painful disease. Through the open wound, an infection entered and my soul drained out. Since then, I have been condemned to suffering.

Suddenly realizing that I had lost all my former luminous dreaminess, I was horrified. Looking in the mirror, I didn't recognize myself. A weary face looked back at me. In the swollen skin of my forehead and cheeks, in the puffy bags under my eyes, and in the eyes themselves, somehow murky and unsteady, something elusive peered through, dousing me with cold. It was a deadness invisible to anyone.

I was increasingly seized by chills.

I tried to clutch at objects to feel life, but I could not replace the missed wind of my childhood, which used to warm me, protect me, and carry me in its soft arms to fragrant bowers of dreams. Mother-of-pearl statuettes, diverse figurines of ivory idols, thick, fragrant book bindings — they piled on me like stone blocks. Irritation gushed forth like a spring and doused everyone indiscriminately. Drops of burning poison fell on my own heart too, vessels burst, blood spurted.

My bankrupt soul made itself known. I felt I was going mad. I was possessed by fear and shame (it hadn't visited me in a long time), but suffering, born of despair, tormented me most of all. I was in pain, and I made myself cause pain to everyone around me. Life turned into one infinitely long, gloomy day. Under a sooty, cotton-wool sky hung a murky haze. Drunk, I crawled on all fours and constantly moistened my parched throat with a gulp of vodka. Narrow corridors twisted and broke on my path, and my wife cried hysterically and lashed me with a wet towel.

I was jealous… Jealousy, this clumsy, slimy animal, eyeless and droning aloud the same thought, swallowed me whole, and I flopped about in the sack of its black stomach.

I know now that I had no reason not to trust my wife then. However, turning into a pig, I wanted everyone around to become like me. I enjoyed others' pain. The sting of my drunken tongue sank into the reed of that tender being, and she, my wife, could not hide from my poison.

«Bitch! Cheap cat!» — my mouth fills with saliva, I was choked by nausea.

Of course, this situation could not last forever, and one day what had to happen, happened, what I had been pushing my wife towards with unforgivable antics, of which only a drunken fool is capable. Love died in convulsions, tearing off its bleeding skin. And then, on stage, appeared that very person who was capable of comforting the exhausted, unhappy woman. And his face is quite ordinary, and he used to visit before, met in the circle of mutual acquaintances, but now his eyes became full of understanding for her, and his fingers — affectionate.

Yes, it happened.

That languid, sultry day when we drove out to the dacha with a noisy company, I remember the deep shadows in the cool room. Yellow-green squares of the windows, not fully covered by the curtains, let in soft rays of light with the shimmering of leafy clusters. Sunbeams fumbled with shapeless spots across the plank floor and the disassembled bed, from which a snow-white sheet streamed in languid folds, and a limp female hand, so familiar to me, hung down at times. The rest of their bodies melted in the gloom. The man was not visible either. But the contact of their bodies was felt even in the air. It was not read with the eyes, but by the breath, tearing from their joined mouths. And in this connection, hidden from sight but tangible, of two bodies gripped by hot passion, lay that very grandeur which could not be contained in words, which one painfully yearns to touch, to plunge into headlong, but which, like so much else, I had irrevocably lost years ago.

I tensely retreated down the corridor. In the back of my head, the beats of my crazed heart echoed in red flashes. Panic fear (or was it fear?) boiled in my lower stomach with icy foam and sprayed my throat.

The street met me with the suffocation of the midday sun and blinded me after the mysterious darkness of the little love room. Hot rays slashed my skin. A deafening avian squall and the noise of foliage cascaded down upon me, but my hearing still clung to the sighs I had heard. The smell of the surrounding flowers and grass pierced me and made my head spin. In the distance, friends were smoking shashlik and sprinkling the air with carefree laughter.

For a minute or two, a sweetish stupor darted through the alleys of my brain. A sensation very close to a child's rapturous excitement from peeping

through a forbidden keyhole tensed like a string in my heart, rang out, trembling from the whirlwind of feelings that raced through for the last time, and froze. Froze forever. As if petrified.

On that day, I died finally. The wings of the majestic bird of happiness, which had flown up for some reason from the land of fairy tales I had long left, washed me in farewell with its familiar air, and I remained alone. Alone for many years. Nothing troubled me anymore, neither people nor their passions. At times I tried to ask myself what purpose my life served, but the question melted away on its own, like ice cream forgotten by someone on a bench under a hot blue summer sky, melting into a milky mass. There is no question, and there is no answer.

An incomprehensible force compelled me to take up the pen, but even on paper, I did not discern the logic of actions and events.

And, to be honest, only pitiful scraps came to mind. I did not understand why the once thick colors of movements and forms suddenly began to lose their former richness and turned into faded rags, boring to look at and fit perhaps for wiping crumbs from a dirty dinner table. Dozens of years merged into a whitish space.

I was born a long time ago, but my life turned out to be short…